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S E R M O N,

PREACHED IN THE

CHURCH OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST,
WAKEFIELD.

BY THE

REV. RICHARD MUNKHOUSE, D. D.

PREVIOUS TO THE

INTRODUCTION OF THE REV. JAMES MERRICK'S VERSION
OF THE PSALMS, WITH MUSIC, PROVIDED BY THE
REV. W. D. TATTERSALL.

LONDON:

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1797.



PREFACE.

NOTHING less than a hope that the publication of the following Discourse may be a means, however humble, of encreasing the number of Mr. MERRICK's advocates and admirers, by introducing his incomparable Version of the Psalms to the more general acquaintance of the lovers of Sacred Poetry, and ultimately promoting in some measure the interests of Religion, could possibly have induced the Author to break from his obscurity.

Connected indeed as this Version (now formed into stanzas by Mr. TATTERSALL) is, with the Music which he has adapted to it, the hope extends itself to a consequent reformation and improvement in Psalmody:—An object, that has been long and ardently wished for by all who have the credit and honour of the established Church, and its mode of worship, at heart.

Notwithstanding, an expectation so flattering would not have been entertained, nor would the Author have presumed to obtrude himself on the notice of the Public, had not this Discourse accidentally fallen under the inspection of a friend, who on perusing it suggested the idea of publication. In
deference

deference to the opinion of one, whose friendship, it is believed, would not knowingly mislead, and whose judgment on any other occasion would not probably have been called in question, the suggestion has—not unreluctantly—been complied with.

Twelve months have elapsed since the introduction of “ Improved Psalmody ” into St. John’s Church ; and the Author of the following Discourse is happy in having it in his power to state, that it has been received by a liberal and discerning congregation in a manner correspondent to its merits. A numerous Choir has been formed and established. All are taught to sing by note ; and the advancement under the direction and superintendency of Mr. Sampson, and the obliging assistance of a musical friend, has been such, as far to exceed the general expectation.

Should this Discourse be favourably received, the Author has it in contemplation to lay before the public a brief account of the mode of teaching, and of the methods, which have been so successfully adopted, for the more expeditious formation, and satisfactory establishment of the said Choir.

SERMON,

St. John’s, Wakefield, May 7, 1797.

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S E R M O N, &c.

PSALM XLVII. 6, 7.

SING PRAISES TO GOD, SING PRAISES: SING PRAISES
UNTO OUR KING, SING PRAISES. FOR GOD IS THE
KING OF ALL THE EARTH: SING YE PRAISES WITH
UNDERSTANDING.

WHAT the opinions of the different commentators are as to the particular occasion of this Psalm it seems unnecessary to enquire. It was probably (though it is not expressly said to have been) composed by David, and is directed to the Chief Musician; "A Psalm for the sons of Korah." It may not be amiss therefore, in order to account for the reason of this address, to notice a few
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circumstances relative to the Jewish church, as to the manner of its administration, and the persons who were employed in some of its more ostensible offices.

We are informed that “ the Levites ” according to their different ranks and orders, “ were appointed unto all manner of service of the Tabernacle of the House of God *; ” doubtless, that it might be administered with the greater dignity and solemnity.

The administration of divine things was not confined to this family till the promulgation of the law of Moses. But after the Lord had chosen the tribe of Levi for his service, and had annexed the priesthood to the family of Aaron, then the right of offering sacrifices to God was reserved to them alone. “ Aaron was separated that he should sanctify the most holy things, he and his sons for ever, to burn incense before the Lord, to minister unto him, and to bless in his name for ever †. ”

* 1 Chron. vi. 48.

† 1 Chron. xxiii. 13.

The persons who sustained the other offices were, first, "The sons of the Kohathites*." "These are the fingers, chief of the fathers of the Levites, who remaining in the chambers were free; for they were employed in that work day and night." Of these, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, were the principal; they were separated to this service by David, to prophecy with harps, psalteries, and with cymbals. They were likewise instructors for songs in the house of the Lord; and being perfectly skilled in music, they might be under the influence of the Holy Spirit while they were employed in this delightful task. (For music and singing were formerly held in such high esteem and reverence, that they who excelled in this faculty were looked upon as persons divinely inspired. Even the most learned and inquisitive writer among the Heathens openly appeals, in his Institutes, to the knowledge of his contemporaries for the truth of the following observation:—"Who is so ignorant, says he, as not to know, that music in ancient times was not only so much studied, but had

* 1 Chron. ix. 33.

in such veneration, that the same persons who were musicians were also accounted prophets and wise men*") They regulated the choir, being the instructors of those who were placed under their care and direction. And since most of the Psalms are addressed to the chief musicians, it is most likely they set to music the Psalms, which David composed.

Next to these, their brethren the Korahites—descendants also of Levi—were employed in an inferior station. They performed all the laborious work that was to be done in the sanctuary; and, “being porters, had the oversight of the gates of the tabernacle. The four chief were in their set office, and were keepers of the chambers and treasuries of the house of God: they lodged round about the temple, and the opening thereof every morning pertained to them: certain of them had the charge of

* Quis ignorat, musicen tantum jam illis temporibus antiquis, non studii modo, verum etiam venerationis habuisse, ut iidem musici et vates judicarentur.

Quintil. L. 1. Instit. Cap. x.

ministering

ministering vessels to bring them in and out by tale*." Whence, it should seem, they were to prepare matters for the use of the priests when they ministered. And, since some of them were appointed to over-see all the instruments of the sanctuary as well as the vessels, it may have been also (besides these services for the priests) a part of their duty to wait on the musicians, and put things in due order for the fingers. When therefore David had composed the Psalms which he addressed to the chief musician for the sons of Korah, it was in all likelihood their province to receive them when set, and distribute them to be sung by the performers in the choir.

Having been thus particular in my researches into the signification of the title of this Psalm, as collected from the sacred writings, it may be expedient to learn (so far as circumstances will admit) the situation of the royal Psalmist, when he applied himself in the fervency of his zeal to such sublime compositions.

* 1 Chron. ix.

This information is in some instances fully ascertained from the title of the Psalm itself: as in the III^d. Psalm, which is entitled—"A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his Son." So likewise Psalm the 30th: "A Psalm and Song at the Dedication of the House of David." Where this is not the case, we have to examine the historical facts related of him as preserved in the Scriptures; and in the perusal of these poems to endeavour to understand them, by looking for such coincidence of peculiar sentiments, personal circumstances, and situation, as may mutually throw light upon each other. When this mode of information is inapplicable, we must consider these sublime Poems either as the effusions of a heart susceptible of the tenderest benevolence and charity towards mankind, and actuated by the most profound sentiments of piety and devotion to God; or in a more evangelical sense, as prophetic of the Advent, Life, and Sufferings of the Messiah.

Notwithstanding however all the assistances which may be derived from these various methods of ascertaining the
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true import, and minutely entering into the spirit, of the Psalms of David, still there will remain—even to the most learned and ingenious—certain difficulties and obscurities, which are inseparable from compositions of so very ancient a date. And although they frequently bear a pointed reference to the customs of a country very remote from us ;—to the manners of a people who lived many centuries before us, so that we might be led to imagine there exists at this day no very evident and striking similitude of those customs and manners, and such as will suit the present times ; yet on a careful and strict investigation of them we shall perceive, that they are admirably adapted to the state and condition of mankind in all places, and throughout all ages.

In these sacred poems we shall find sentiments conveyed in that highly figurative language, which is allowed to be the characteristic style of Oriental poetry—in general. Many of them were the warm, genuine, perhaps unpremeditated, effusions of the heart. And the ancient manner of performing these compositions, by a distribution of the parts among bands of Lyristes responsive to each

each other, was a circumstance that favoured the assuming for several of them a dramatic form. They consisted purely and undeniably of lyric measure; and were delivered through the medium of modulated tones, and a spontaneous accompaniment of the lyre or harp. If we reflect on the singular nature of them it cannot be thought extraordinary, that by the generality they should be accounted abrupt, irregular, and at intervals even totally incoherent.

It has been intimated by a judicious writer, and it is unquestionably the source of no small perplexity in the Psalms of David, that the royal composer varies person; introducing into his poems (in a great number of passages which it is almost unnecessary for me to particularize in this place) the words of others—his friends, enemies, and God himself—without staying to apprise his readers where the speaker is changed.

There are divers Psalms which an attentive critic will not hesitate to pronounce alternate, or responsive poems. I might here instance the 24th, the 55th, the 91st, the
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121st, and the 134th. In all which it is no easy matter to reconcile the abrupt change of person, and obvious incongruity, to our apprehensions of good sense and requisite order, on any other idea than that which is here suggested.

Agreeably then to this arrangement, we may suppose the interlocutors to be alternately the Psalmist himself, and the respective heads of the congregation;—the Levites, the High Priest, the Priests, and others*. And if you examine the above-mentioned Psalms, and others that will present themselves in this point of view, you will perceive—I am inclined to think—much obscurity, much seeming tautology, and violent abruptness done away, and little or no necessity whatever for the most part for conjectural emendations; which are in fact, and in too many cases, no better than corruptions of the text.

The Psalm from which the text is taken presents none

* The Author is indebted to an ingenious anonymous Essay in a Periodical Publication for the preceding Remark.

of those difficulties, which in others may sometimes tend to distract our devotion. It is a song of praise, thanksgiving, and a profession of unlimited dependance on the universal power, dominion, and goodness of God; and was probably composed on occasion of some signal victory obtained by the Israelites over their enemies, and sung by the whole congregation. It has descended to us with every possible recommendation both of subject and composition, and is well calculated to form a part of the service of the Christian Church. It affords a continual exhortation to us to express in the warmest manner our joy and gratitude on account of God's unbounded kindness, care, and protection; and to acknowledge everlasting praises to be due to him from all mankind, but from Christians above other men, for his great mercies towards them. Or it may be viewed under a more limited, but at the same time under a most exalted, signification; and with the translators of our Bible we may contemplate it in a prophetic light, as fore-telling the Ascension of our blessed Saviour, and as an exhortation to us cheerfully to become the subjects of the kingdom of Christ.

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I have been induced to premise these observations with an eye to the instruction contained in the latter part of the text, wherein David directs the congregation of Israel, and all the sincere worshippers of God, to “sing praises unto him with understanding.”

The Psalms of David, originally composed for the use of the Jewish Church, have been received and regarded by the different Churches in Christendom with all that deference and respect, which are due to the devout compositions of their august and inspired Author. They have been consecrated to religious worship;—have all along formed a part of the service of the Christian Church;—and have been read and sung, in public and in private, in preference to other compositions, from the earliest periods to the present times, whenever the characters, feelings, situation, or condition of men, have borne any affinity to the circumstances in which they were relatively produced.

The translations now used by the Reformed Church to which we belong, are principally, the prose version inserted
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in our Book of Common Prayer, which follows the translation of the Great English Bible set forth and used in the time of King Henry the VIIIth, and Edward the VIth : and another, contained in our present Bible, which was published by the direction, and under the auspices of James the Ist. To these are added two metrical versions ; one by Sternhold, Hopkins, and others their associates in the work, set forth with the Great English Bible above-mentioned :—another by Tate and Brady during the reign of William the IIIrd. Several other versions* however were undertaken between those periods ; and some of them obtained the royal sanction, to be admitted into parochial Churches. Notwithstanding the many evident marks of genius and merit in these performances, the authors were not successful in proportion to their expectations, and the pains they had laudably taken. At length prejudices began to wear off—I mean, the prejudices

* In a splendid edition of Mr. Merrick's work formed into stanzas, with which the Editor has lately very obligingly presented me, there is in the introduction an elaborate account of the numerous metrical Versions of the Psalms.

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formed from a long acquaintance with, and attachment to the version of Sternhold and Hopkins;—and Brady and Tate had the peculiar good fortune to meet with a warm advocate in the (then) Bishop of London*, who recommended their translation to the countenance and encouragement of his clergy; by which means their work was in a manner established. But that the old version might not be entirely superseded, it was thought advisable to render it more acceptable to the improved taste which then prevailed; and therefore the mode of expression underwent a considerable alteration, which has hitherto secured its continued use in the Church.

Of the prose versions, that of the present Bible has the preference, and it may perhaps be reckoned amongst the most accurate translations of the Scriptures in any language. In it we read the Hebrew phrases rendered with the most scrupulous exactness. But having said so much we must allow that this very exactness makes it less intelligible. And in order that it might be as faithful as

* Dr. Compton.

possible, it is urged much farther into the Hebrew idiom than is agreeable to the genius of our language.

The merit of the metrical translation of Tate and Brady tends, it is true, greatly to the disparagement of the older version, but still it must be confessed by its most strenuous advocates that they have not been able altogether to approve; and that there yet remained room enough for the encouragement of biblical learning, to engage in an expository translation (if I am permitted to use the expression) which should at once do justice to the original, and to the English tongue, by its fidelity, its elegance, its critical acumen, and ingenuity.

An author of great talents and learning*—confessedly skilled in oriental literature himself, and who had received the assistance of the most eminent Hebrew scholars† of his time—about thirty years ago published a new me-

* Rev. James Merrick, A. M. late Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford.

† At the head of these may be placed the late Dr. Lowth, then Prebendary of Durham, afterwards Bishop of London.

trical version of the Psalms; the superior excellence of which, compared with the translations that preceded it, is readily admitted by all, who enter upon an unprejudiced examination of their respective deserts.

The advantage which this version possesses over every other, does not merely consist in the peculiar elegance of its style, but also in the successful manner in which the probable meaning of the Psalmist is for the most part ascertained. It is (if I may so say) a lively commentary and exposition of abstruse passages. Many of those hasty transitions, by which we had hitherto been startled and perplexed, are rendered easy and intelligible: Most of the obscurities arising from the sudden change of persons and interlocutors removed; and the Psalms in which they occur, appear now sufficiently correct, and assume the air of regular compositions. Still, as the version did not as yet possess the requisite merit of being divided into stanzas for Music, it was by no means calculated for public use.

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This desirable accommodation has been undertaken by an Editor, who seems to have accomplished it in a manner answerable to the skill and diligence bestowed upon it. He has likewise added a prose paraphrase, couched in terms easily to be understood, even by persons not accustomed to the transpositions which metre demands. I would also farther observe, that owing to the indefatigable perseverance, the consummate care and consideration of the Editor, this version possesses no inconsiderable additional advantage in the great attention that has been employed on the arguments, or summary of contents, of each Psalm; which on comparison will be found more full, more faithful and explicit, than that which accompanies the Bible translation. In few words; if I may freely speak my sentiments of this version in its present form, I do not hesitate to avow, that so far as concerns the versification these Psalms rank, in my judgment, among the most finished poems our language can boast:—That whatever difficulties may occur to the unlearned from a poetical transposition of the words, or from any other cause, these are satisfactorily removed by
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the paraphrase:—That an attentive perusal of them cannot fail to afford at once instruction and pleasure, to the simple peasant, and to the accomplished scholar:—That they are admirably adapted to the purposes of calm and serious devotion, whether in our churches, or in our closets; and cannot reasonably fail, wherever they are favourably received, to promote the interests of piety and virtue.

The advice of the inspired author in the text, directing the true worshippers of God to “sing praises” unto him “with understanding,” furnishes me with an opportunity, under favour of your continued attention, to add a few observations on the subject of Psalmody, with which I shall conclude.

I have in the former part of this discourse hazarded an opinion, that some of the Psalms of David were perhaps the unpremeditated effusions of the heart, delivered through the medium of modulated tones accompanied by the lyre. What and how admirable must have been the

effect of such extemporary compositions from a master of his instrument, and from the warmth and exalted nature of the royal prophet's feelings, we cannot readily imagine!—Neither can we, perhaps, form an adequate idea of the effect to be produced, after the ancient manner of performing hymns, by a distribution of parts to bands of lyrists responsive to each other; whom, with respect to the compositions immediately under our consideration, we may represent to ourselves as convened with the great congregation of Israel, commemorating some signal deliverance from danger, or deprecating the apprehended displeasure of the God of Jacob!—

The music of the Churches of Christendom, however capable it is of being employed to the advancement of pure devotion, falls greatly short (so far at least as we are acquainted with it) of the solemn and interesting effects here alluded to.

In the established church of this country we do indeed, occasionally, perceive something like an attempt at
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restoring to this part of our service its due weight in the scale of a reasonable worship. In the choirs of our cathedrals more especially, no small attention has of late years been paid to this branch of our service. And we find, that the Psalms of David have been, and frequently are, chosen by our most celebrated and eminent professors, as subjects of their musical compositions. In a few of our parochial churches we may observe the disposition at least to improvement, by the eagerness with which some step forward to be instructed in the rudiments of music, with a view of practising psalmody; and by a distribution of tunes into parts for different voices. But we can hardly hope for any considerable improvements (though the laudable practise were much more prevalent than it is) while we continue and confine our regards to the versions now in use.

For, independent of the difficulty, of which the most skilful professors in music complain, that attends the setting good tunes to words so very deficient in expression, we cannot but be sensible of the impropriety of
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setting the whole of a long Psalm (in which a variety of subject may be comprehended, and opposite passions expressed) to the same tune; or even of leaving the adaptation of any particular words to the taste or judgment of an unthinking or unskilful person.

We clearly perceive the justness of the observation of an ingenious writer*, that one air or piece (speaking on the subject of musical composition in general) should never be made to express more than one sentiment. There is a necessary unity of idea throughout the same movement. And to break it is as great an offence against the taste or affection on one hand, as the want of genius, sufficient to extend to the limits of variety which the mind in that case allows, is on the other. But different sentiments being sung to the same tune (however common the practice) is absurd, and incongruous.

* The reader, who may not have seen Jardine's Letters from Barbary, &c. will meet with many curious and pertinent remarks on musical composition in the volumes of that lively and entertaining writer.

In order to obviate these objections, which with me are otherwise insurmountable, the Editor of the Version I would gladly introduce to your notice has been exceedingly industrious, not only to divide the Psalms (where necessary) into distinct portions, but has also provided tunes which have been expressly composed for them;—all scientifically and harmoniously adapted by the genius and judgment of the first masters to the prevailing idea (according to the variation of subject, or sentiment) contained in each.

I would not wish to be understood as speaking altogether to the disparagement of the Psalmody hitherto in use among us. My objection, indeed, to the senseless custom of indifferently singing the same tunes to words expressive of opposite feelings and sentiments, remains the same. But it is with equal pride and pleasure I admit, that a few of our old tunes (which I need not point out to you, and which will certainly be retained by us) possess a kind and degree of merit, that will probably continue to defy all competition; and remain, I trust, in our

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churches lasting monuments of the abilities, and devout temper of mind, with which they appear to have been composed. Allow me however to observe, that the manner in which they are usually sung is far from doing justice to their deserts, or producing that sublime effect which otherwise would attend them. Their continual recurrence, moreover, has a tendency to cloy ; and the languid, drawling, insipid mode of singing them, insults our understanding, and hangs heavy on the ear.

It is surely then an object of no small moment to see these abuses with respect to a few particular tunes remedied. And as for the rest, and in the place of versions, to which we have been hitherto accustomed ;—instead of a kind of Psalmody, which, so far from exalting, tends unhappily to weaken or repress our devotion ; it is, I say, an object of no small moment to have these respectively superseded by such a version, and such a collection of tunes, as shall at once powerfully engage the attention, and alike gratify the most refined and the simplest taste.

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Those which I would now submit to your consideration (I am willing to persuade myself) have only to be known, in order to be approved and applauded. In presuming to say so much, I do not build on my own unqualified judgment:—they have already been approved and applauded by others:—they are honoured with the patronage of Royalty:—they are loaded with encomiums by men, whose decisions we are accustomed to respect;—and, so far as my own observation extends, I do not recollect to have met with any dissentient opinions with regard to their merit among those who have perused and attentively examined them.

It constitutes a part of my present engagements to form a choir in this church (with the approbation and consent of my Dioceſan, which have been politely conveyed to me) on the principles, and according to the valuable directions annexed to the volumes under conſideration, which I will once more take the liberty ſtrongly to recommend to your attentive peruſal.

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I am happy in having such musical abilities at hand as are engaged with me in the work* ; in addition to which I would solicit your countenance, concurrence, and support. I have only to request that you will satisfy yourselves of the truth concerning what has been advanced ; and I ask your assistance only in degree as you shall impartially examine, and can cheerfully approve.

To conclude. Let it be remembered, that the grand object in view is the advancement of pure and rational devotion. I will proceed farther, and do venture to assert, that the interests, the cause, and credit of the established Church demand a greater share of attention to this part of its service, than has for a long time been bestowed upon it.

It is perhaps to be wished that Music were more generally taught in our common schools. And I cannot but

* Mr. Richard Sampson, organist of St. John's, Wakefield ; a person high in the estimation of many lovers and judges of music, both as a performer and composer.

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regret with a very sensible writer* the untoward circumstance of such numbers among us remaining unacquainted with so easy a thing as the Gamut, or rudiments of the system of Music ;—the source of such refined pleasure. Let but a taste for this charming and delightful science be once encouraged and cultivated among the lower orders of society, and then we may expect to see our churches well filled, our congregations induced to join their voices with the harmonious choirs, and all vying with each other in taste and performance.

An elegant and rational amusement will then be presented to the youth of both sexes.—They will imperceptibly acquire habits of regularly attending public worship.—They will be the more strongly attached to it from natural and innocent partialities ;—from a consciousness that the service of the church is in part sustained by their presence, by their laudable exertions, and polished attainments. Then shall we “sing unto the Lord a new song ;” then shall we “sing praises unto him with understanding.” Hallelujah. Amen !

* Jardine.

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